
Concealed Applied Brocade

INGRID GEELEN

ANNE-SOPHIE AUGUSTYNIAK

ILL. 73

Detail from a piece of applied brocade in imitation of red velvet brocade with stylised pomegranate motifs – Garden with Daniel in the Lions' Den

Applied brocade refers to a relief decoration that tangibly imitates silk textiles enriched with gold thread, which appeared frequently in the visual arts of the late Gothic period.¹ It was generally produced by pressing a sheet of tinfoil into a mould incised with a design, adding a filler to maintain the pattern in relief, painting or gilding the surface of the tinfoil, then applying it to the surface to be decorated. Its use can reveal information about the production process, the pedigree and transmission of particular motifs, the importance of silk fabrics or the collaboration and influences between different craftsmen. Every discovery arouses many expectations – and this was certainly the case with the applied brocade on the rear and side walls of the outer cabinet that came to light while dismantling the *Enclosed Garden with Daniel in the Lions' Den* (G4).

The sheets of tinfoil, measuring 15 cm in width and 19.5 cm in height, were glued to the plain wood panels in straight, consecutive rows. They were composed in a traditional manner using a now grey, oxidized tinfoil that was reinforced with a filler (the composition of which is still unclear) and stuck on with a red, oily-resinous (?) adhesive. The red glaze of the highlighting seems to cover the tinfoil directly, while the gold leaf appears to be missing. Future analyses will have to determine whether the gold leaf had perhaps been replaced by a gold-imitating glaze. Thanks to centuries of protection, the fragile relief decoration remained in a relatively good state of preservation. It mimics a red brocade velvet, inspired by the much appreciated *a cammino* designs, with stylised pomegranate, pine cone or thistle motifs in lobed corollas. The relief pattern combines a contour around the plain areas with vertical and diagonal striations. The centre of the pomegranate or thistle motif was filled in with minuscule raised dots.

The relief decoration inside the wooden cabinet has been combined with a 'ceiling' painted in a matt blue. The red colour of the applied brocade continues on the exterior of the cabinet, decorated with little stencilled flowers, and is repeated in the background of the painted side panels depicting the saints. The finely wrought tracery of the cabinet's cornice and frieze have also been polychromed in red, blue and gold.

Textiles played an important part in furnishing the Enclosed Gardens: they were employed for the numerous silk flowers, as wrappings for relics or as background decoration. For example, the painted side walls in the *Enclosed Garden with a Calvary scene* (G3) may have imitated textile. It might be supposed that the applied brocade's illusionistic silk velvet created a symbolically ideal cladding for the emotionally charged *hortus conclusus* and also intensified the opulence of the Enclosed Garden. However, the striking relief decorations were never on view and, ultimately, played no part at all in the Enclosed Garden's scenography. It may be that, visually, they vied too much for attention with the latticework of *paperolles*, relics and medallions. For the hospital sisters, the cabinet that was commissioned and delivered, including its polychromed and painted panels, would appear to have been largely a receptor for the spiritual and mystical paradise garden. The textile imitations disappeared entirely behind the uniformly black-painted walls of the inner cabinet, which in fact lent themselves better to the attachment of ornamentation than did the delicate relief decoration. Further study of the collected documentary evidence is certain to raise new questions and focus our attention still further on this fascinating technique.

¹ Ingrid Geelen and Delphine Steyaert, *Imitation and Illusion. Applied Brocade in the Art of the Low Countries in the*

Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries. Scientia Artis, 6 (Brussels: Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), 2011).